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History of the United Protestant Movement in the Matanuska Valley, culmination in the UN. Protestant Ch. of Palmer Alaska

I. Early concept of the colony in the Matanuska Valley
   1. Original Concept.
      a. A town was to be constructed with farms surrounding the town, each family was to have his own acreage.
      b. A town was to be constructed, with the agricultural area about farmed as a group and not as individuals. Large machinery was purchased which could do farming on a large scale.
      c. A third concept was the town in the center, but farmers were to live on farms surrounding the town. Two miles out was to be the extent of the farm colony if possible.
   2. Concept changed:
      a. Project mgr. Don L. Irwin had a different concept from Washington and his effort was spent to build up farms as any part of our country would do.
      b. Help to Mr. Iwrin's idea and hurt to the first concept came when farmers close to Palmer refused to sell any or all their land to the government for the colony. Again help came when some soil was found not to be too suitable for agriculture.

II. Concept of the church:
   1. Church was to be as an army church. Building was to be built by Govt. Pastor was to be selected by Govt. Denominations were not thought of. Since a great many were to be of Scandanavian origin a Protestant was thought to be the chosen leader.
   2. A second addition to the above thinking was when the Catholic Church insisted that since some of the colony farmers were to be Catholic that they be allowed to have a Priest assigned to the colony.
   3. In keeping with the first concept the Presbytery of Yukon at its late winter meeting at Seward requested the Board of National Missions of the Presbyterian Ch. USA, who in turn requested the F.E.R.A. office in Washington DC that a member of our Presbytery be assigned to care for the Protestants. (This action came because the Inter-Denominational Comm. known as the Home Missions Council, representatives from various Protestant Churches of the States, assigned this territory in which the settlement was to be made to the Presbyterians and as a denomination were carrying out the assignment and had been doing so for at least 20 years prior to the colony).
      a. Dr. Somerndyke, then Secretary of the Alaska Division of the Board of National Missions, contacted those in authority in Washington requesting the assigning of our Yukon Presbytery members to this colony.
      b. On Apr. 3rd. 1935 N. Lester Troast, Supervising Architect of the Alaska Rural Rehibilitation movement, wrote Dr. Somerndyke the following: It is the desire of the Alaska Rural Rehilibitation Corp. and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration that the church be inter-denominational in character and not bear any denominational name. It is our purpose to make this community a self centered one, and it seems to me that any religious organization would be able to serve a much larger field by dropping whatever sectarian cloak it might wish to retain. The majority of the settlers will be of Scandanavian origin and will probably be connected with one of the Luthern Churches, so I believe that it the church bore the name "Community" it would fit into the setting a lot better than if it bore the name Episcopalian, Presbyterian or any other denomination.

c. Time came for the colony to arrive, action was needed. Dr. Somerndyke had not yet permission of the Home Missions Council to have one of our men assigned to the colony as there was the thinking of the Methodists that the worker assigned should be paid out of a fund of the Home Missions Council instead of the Presbyterian Church. Hence due the urgency Dr. Somerndyke assigned myself to the task of serving the Protestans of the colony. I arrived on the field on May 6th, just ahead of the Californian workers sent in to clear the ground. The farmers arrived five days later.

d. Methodists church leaders rode the trains contacting the farmers on their way across the States to see what calibre they were and if they wanted to be a part of the adventure. They also surveyed the field after the farmers arrived.

e. June of 1935 was the time the decision was made by the Home Missions Council, after the survey was made by the Methodists, and the field of the Matanuska Valley with its colony was assigned to the Presbyterians. The records show that in the assigning this field that, "it is understood that if, and when, a church organization is effected among these new settlers it will be a community church."

3. Later concept of the church in the valley:

a. The Catholic Church appeared on the scene early, a cordial relationship sprang up between the Protestans and the Catholics, Father Saulzman seemed to be getting in very good with his people. It was soon seen however that the first concept of one building for all was not their thinking and that eventually they would build their own church even tho the Government had in mind one building taking up one side of the main community square.

b. Rev. Freiling of the Luthern Church was assigned to work with the Lutherns (Mo. Synod). Rev. Aussen of the Augustanna Synod was given a simmilar assignment but later returned to his home town of St. Paul, Minn. Rev. Freiling stayed on.

c. The comming of the Lutherns presented a conflict as they insisted that if they could not have a part of the program they would object to the Government building a building for the Catholics and the Protestanss. Politics was strong enough that the "one church idea" was in the early weeks already held in abeyance.

d. Lutherns and Catholics found land north of the Community center and the Protestants West of the Community center. Each built buildings where the one in charge lived and held worship services.

e. All this time the Protestant group was trying to comply with the request of the Home Missions Council and run a community church. This was being rapidly broken down as can be seen. First it was the Lutherns. Next the Seven Day Adventists put up a worship place of their own. Third it was the "Church of God" (Anderson, Indiana group). A minister came in from that church and started erecting a building.

III. Organization of the United Protestant Church

1. Protestants faced winter with no building and as stated above land was obtained and a manse erected. Services were held there till Palm Sunday the following year. Our highest attendance was 84 in the 24x30 building. From there on services were held in the Gymnansium.

2. First organization was set up in December 1935. A temporary committee was named which was to formulate a Constitution and bi-laws. In the new government authority was to rest in the combined boards of the church together with the S.S. Supt., the Ladies Aid President, and a repre. of the Young People. This combined Org. was known as the Council.

3. Steps taken to comply with request that church be Inter-denominational or community:

a. With the assignment given to the Presbyterians by the Home Missions Council, the Inter-denominational agency, it was neccssary therefore to get this new constitution and bi-laws okeyed by the Home Missions Council and the Board of National Missions. All papers were put in readiness to go to each of the above organizations.

b. In May 1936 I presented these papers in person to both Dr. Dawber of the Home Missions Council and to Dr. Somerndyke of the Board of National Missions. Dr. Somerndyke asked Dr. Dawber to put the new constitution in final writing. Some changes were made by Dr. Dawber, they were typed in Dr. Somerndyke's office and the draft brought back to Palmer was much the same as that which was originally drawn up by the people of Palmer and myself as pastor. This was then later adopted to be the constitution of the United Protestant Church of Palmer by the members of the congregation as a regularly called meeting.

c. But since our local church was much under the direction also of the Alaska Rural Rehibilitation Corp. of the Matanuska Valley I made a call on the project Mgr. Leo B. Jacobs relative to the newly formed constitution and our relationship to a mother denomination. I explained what a community church was, how it was in fact tied up with no denomination to which it was to be responsible and from which it could accrue certain benefits such as a regular pastorate and financial assistance. I then explained our Inter-denominational set up, the Home Missions Council, that it was made up of representatives of the major Protestant denominations, who studied various missions fields in the United States and Alaska and who then assigned different members of their organization to cover the new area that should be entered. Such a assignee was to be responsible that the pulpit would be kept filled, give such financial help that would be needed and in general see that the ministerial work would be on a high grade. In our case it would commensurate with the desires of the F.E.R.A. and the local A.R.R.C. Mr. Jacobs stated at once that he wished us to be the latter type of organization. -- This having been cared for prior to my going to New York, and Washington, D.C. in 1935, I passed the information on to both Dr. Dawber and Dr. Somerndyke. This was also reported to the members of the Council of the United Protestant Church prior to my going East.

d. This new directive by the manager of the A.R.R.C., and accepted by the Home Missions Council, was a far cry from being a church such as we have in our Army camps today. Getting away from the original concept of a church met at that time with the approval of all. (the fact is we were very fearful that the Governament would want to run the whole eccleastical work. This therefore made an abrupt break from the first concept. We were not now to be just a group of Protestants disconnected from the denominations from which we came. We were definately tied with the denominations from which we came thru its inter-church organization, the Home Missions Council.

4. Location:

a. We were on land given to us by Mr. Snodgrass from September 1935 till the Summer of 1936. This we did not feel to be satisfactory.

b. There was no chance to get A.R.R.C. land in the community center as long as there were objections by the Lutherns.

c. Thru the efforts of Dr. Albrecht, May 1936 brought a new picture of the whole work. The A.R.R.C. Board of Directors were prevailed upon by the doctor, to include the Lutherns in their program for churches in the community center. There was a great work that needed to be deone and it was felt that there was a place for a destinctive Luthern work.

d. Land was therefore given by the A.R.R.C to the three churches, -Catholic, Protestant, and Luthern. One whole city block was parcelled out between the three of us, each getting a third. Temporary leases were given to each of us, each deed was to be follow if we started to build within six months and completed till the roof was on. The Board of National Missions gave us a grant of 1500 dollars for the church building.

e. Under the directions of the Church Council trees were cut down and on my return from New York and Washington we did the mill work at night by volunteer labor. The corner stone was laid by late summer and the building begun immediately. The ladies did much work, even to the skinning of the logs. September 1936 therefore found us well under way.

f. Early Spring of 1937 found the roof on and inside work advanced to the place the A.R.R.C. saw we were serious, wanted a church strong enough to build it by volunteer labor, almost 90% of it, and we would complete the same. They pleased with the type of organization as described above, the deed was made out to the Board of National Missions of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.-- There was a provision however that the pulpit had to be continuously filled -not vacant longer than one year- and the appearance of the property had always to be kept in first class shape. From here on we were to be a responsible religious organization.

5. Membership:

a. There was to be two types of membership: Presbyterian and Affiliated. (this is akin to the government of the Presbyterian Church.) The latter group could retain their membership in their respective denominations but by active support thru effort and finance they would have all the privileges of the first group with the exception of being elected to the Eldership.

b. Membership was contingent in each case whether or not the prospective member would sign the membership roll, signifying by that signature that he or she would or had accepted Jesus Christ as Savior and would consecrate his or her life to Hi. Denominational dogmas were not ask to be changed. The Baptist could retain his baptism theory if he signed up as a Presbyterian, so could the member of the Christian Church, or the member of the Episcopalean church. Most of those that were members of the churches that were represented in the Home Missions Council readily became Presbyterians for the time being, many of those that were members of the churches not belonging to the Home Missions Council were on the rolls as affiliated members. This was according to the original intent of the Home Missions Council.

c. 59 signed the membership roll as Presbyterians and
25 signed the roll as affiliated members.

6. Physical unity with the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.

a. Application was made at the Spring meeting of the Yukon Presbytery 1937, to be enrolled as a member church of the Yukon Presbytery. This was voted upon by the congregation of the United Protestant Church at a duly called meeting. The Constitution of the United Protestant Church was in turn read by the members of the Yukon Presbytery, with explanations as to its unusual character. Mr. Walter Huntley presented the application. While we were to be a part of the larger denomination yet we had an obligation to minister to all the protestants in the community even though they would not accept in total some of the doctrines of the Presbyterian Church. Inn In its latter group were Christian Scientists, Reorganized L.D.S. and Four Square Gospel folk, etc.

b. Yukon Presbytery accepted the application with the stipulation that all members would be required to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and consecrate their lives to Hi. That they would support the local church with their efforts and finance, and that regular and sytemetic reports would be forwarded to the Presbytery for their approval or dissapproval, and that any alterations in the whole United Protestant Church adventure in the Matanuska Valley would be brought to the Presbytery for approval.

New pastors were to be chosen only after consultation with the Alaska Secretary of the Board of National Missions and approved by him. His name would be added to the ministeral rool of Presbytery. This last requirement later revoted by the local United Protestant Church, which after some discussion was readily done. (such had to be voted by other churches of the Presbytery as well)

c. The Presbytery appointed a committee to organize the church and install the pastor. The church was formally organized on April 11, 1937 by Rev. John E. Youel and the pastor installed. The church was dedicated on the same date. At the close of the organization of the church those participating in the organization came and signed the membership roll. (my eversharp pencil was used to sign the membership roll and I never saw it afterwards) This then completed our being organized into a church tied in with the Presbyterian Denomination, yet having a function and a responsibility that included service to other protestant faiths, as requested by the government.

7. The addition of Elders:

a. In serving communion up to the time of 1939 we were compelled to fall back on two formerly ordained persons for that service. Mr. Walter Huntley, formerly ordained persons for that service. formerly an elder in a Presbyterian Church in Northern Mich. before he moved to a Baptist community and joined that church, and Dr. C.E. Albrecht, trained and sent to the field by the Moravian Church. Both of these churches are members of the Home Missions Council. But this continuing over a period of years would soon become unsatisfactory.

b. It would further become unsatisfactory as Palmer, or the United Protestant Church could never officially have a representative at Presbytery with a voting privilege, or could they be rrpresented at either synod of General Assembly.

c. Dr. Everett B. King successor in 1939 to the late Dr. J.M. Somerndyke, prposed to correct the above that we add elders to the staff of church officers. The elders were to be Presbyterian. Other members of the council could retain the former church membership if they so liked but not the elders. This would give them a voting privilege and a representative privilege at Presbytery, Synod, and General Assembly. Travel could be readily paid to and from such organization meetings. This was presented to the local church to the Council first and then to the Congregation in December of the year 1939. It was accepted and elders were added to the list of Council members at the annual meeting, 1940. Besides voting in the members of the church as is done in Presbyterian fashion, their other duties were to administer the sacrements and to read over and sign the minutes of the council, signifying their approval, and present them to Presbytery. Presbytery accepted this new arrangement and seated the delegate at its next regular meeting.

d. Such organization now is akin to that of the Presbyterian Church with the exception of the business being first conducted by the Council and the opportunity of difference in dogma, as with the case of 13 different types of religious thinking being brought together.

IV. What the term United Protestant Implies:

1. We each can have our own doctrinal thinking but we are united in our efforts to eradicate sinnadman sin and to bring boys and girls, men and women to Christ.

2. It means that we believe that the best way to accomplish the above is to work thru denominational organizations. We are not to be undenominational such as independent religious movements express themselves to be, but interdenominational.

3. It means that we are to governed by a certain religious organization that has been assigned the task by the Home Missions Council. (If in a Methodist territory then we would be under the supervision of the Methodist Episcopal Church. If in a Northern Baptist territory, then we would be under their juriddiction, if in Presbyterian territory, then under the jurisdiction of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.
4. It also means that the respective denominations that are a part of the Home Missions Council -(some 20 or more in all)- expect the individual to become a member of the denomination in which locality he is living (these allocations have been made for near 50 years in Alaska, and is a movement in good standing and has proven very successful in its accomplishments)
5. It means that you cannot change your constitution or bi-laws without getting the consent of the organization that you chose to be over you I mean further any contemplated change in physical structure of the buildings or program must be given the approval of the Presbytery with which you are a member. As said before you are not undenomination but inter-denominational. You have been provided money by a denomination. You have been guaranteed a continuous pastor. You have been received by the General Assembly of the church at its annual meetins on two different occasions. You, by agreement are also to support the mission Program of the denomination under which you labor. And as much as possible use the literature of the church which gives you its support.

This you will see is a far cry from the Government owned and operated church that was thought of at the beginning. But this church as it finally came to be is of greater strength and has accomplished more than could have ever been thought of or accomplished under the first concept. Our youth in the Valley have grown to be fine men and women. Our Young people's religious movement in the territory has dated from the origin of the farm colony. King's Lake County was brought into being by Palmer Young people. Its members have being given Federal and Terriotorial responsiblility Denominations are the medium thru which God is allowing you wo work. We can thank God some one was interested enough in our coming to Alaska, thay they did what they did for us. At the timm time of the Presbyterian Churches giving assistance many of the churches and the denominations, and the political parties had this colonay all wiped out in old books. You were scheduled to fail but you did not. Not little cause for the reason for your success has been your church, its inter-denominational aspect, its help from the assigned denomination which yet today must give reports back to the inter-denominational organization - the Home Missions Council. If in the future you are more readily accepted by the Presbyterian Church in Alaska as a good part of its work despair should not overtake you. You should feel happy to be a part of that branch of the Kingdom of God. Remember we all have one Program, under the same God and hand in hand we try to bring others to Him. We may have various sets of officers to accomplish that end, but together we care for Him.